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Family-school cooperation in the context of inclusion of children with special educational needs

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Abstract

Although current legislative measures recognize parents participation in school life, several difficulties remain and many barriers need to be broken down as there are still uncomfortable situations to be dealt with between school and parents. In this context, the aim of this study is to identify and to interpret parents, teachers and students' opinions concerning parental involvement and participation in their children's school life. This study was carried out in an interpretative and descriptive paradigm which involves children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), their families and the relationship between them and the schools their children are attending. It is a exploratory, cross-sectional study, with convenience sample of 119 parents, 22 kindergarten teachers and teachers and 168 students attending a school situated in a rural area in the interior centre of Portugal. The four instruments used were adapted from Zenhas, A. (2006) and Dias, J. (1999). The results were analyzed through a descriptive statistics program, SPSS 19.0, which allowed us to discover that parents' participation in their children's school life is still very incipient. The conclusion that it is up to school to assume a relevant role in coordinating with the families, to outline the objectives of the intervention and which strategies should be adopted to enable the increasing level of participation of families and implement policy measures where all stakeholders (parents, students with special educational needs and teachers) feel more included.

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1. Introduction:

Given the profound changes that schooling has undergone in recent decades – the growing burden of schooling and teachers, who are increasingly saddled with assignments of a social nature, and the enormous diversity that inhabits today's school – reflecting on family-school collaboration is reflecting on an important timely question.

Reflecting on family-school collaboration is to remember that the family is the first institution to be responsible for educating children. The family is the first place for all education; however, with the precipitous changes that have taken place in society, families delegate many of their traditional functions to schools. Hence, schools increasingly feel the need to bring the family into school life.

In recent years, several researchers have been examining the issue of the relationship between school and the family. The involvement of families in school has been found to be positively related to students' educational success and the inclusion of those with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Bronfenbrenner (1979, cited by Villas-Boas, 2001) emphasizes the emergence and importance of an ecological relationship between the school, family and the environment in the sense that human development is naturally dynamic, made of ebbs and flows involving a continuous number of transitions. In this same vein, Pedro, Villas-Boas and Fonseca (2000) state that "...school, the family and the community are three prevailing contexts in the student's world and that the school/family/community partnership can be a powerful tool for improving the quality of learning, the school's image and promoting social life" (p.7). Appreciation of closer relations between the school and the family is praised by Villas-Boas (2001), who believes that parental involvement in children's education has been granted great theoretical and practical importance in the context of the child's cognitive development and their school performance.

Reflecting on the school-family relationship means becoming aware of cultural diversity, experiences, values and feelings of all stakeholders involved in education. To reflect on this problem is to think about different cultures: school culture and family culture, including the families belonging to different social groups. The school-family relationship can be understood as relations between parents and children about schooling, or the parents' contact with the school or with teachers. Legislation provides parents involvement in school. In Waller and Parsons' opinion (cited by Silva, 2003), the school and the family are institutions with "different ends, objectives and activities" (p.91), exerting separate influences on children. Like other authors, Villas-Boas (2001) also says that teachers consider that many of the problems students face in school stem from the home environment and parents often step down from their role as educators.

Cultural discontinuity between the family context and the school context may be a factor contributing to distance, conflict and tension between these two institutions. However, the school and the teachers cannot enclose themselves in a school culture. They have to show openness to the culture of the students and their families.

For Zenhas (2006, p. 34, citing Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997 and Davies, 1989), "the differences of language and culture between the school and the disadvantaged classes, from a socio-economic perspective, are a factor of exclusion and a barrier to parental involvement in school". The school requests the same thing from all parents, but not all parents can give the same response to these requests. And if families do not have the school's language, what world will talk about?

The school, which owns the "linguistic capital" and the "cultural capital", should be the one to take the first step towards families, so that parents will find fewer barriers to their participation and become active members and the educational community. The school must build bridges between such different worlds and realities. Only thus can it be an inclusive school that welcomes difference: differences of diverse cultures, knowledge and children, often with SEN. This rapprochement between the school and the family, which encourages parental involvement "cannot be achieved only by decree, but through strategies with the aim of experiencing partnerships" (Villas-Boas, 2008, p.57).

Given that in today's society the definition of the roles and functions of both the school and the family is neither clear nor consensual. From Epstein's (Epstein & Sanders, 1998, cited by Villas-Boas, 2001) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, we can state that the important common objectives of the school, family and community can

only be effectively achieved if there is cooperation between the parties in a partial overlap of their areas of influence. The fact that the overlapping of the spheres is partial also enables there to be a common zone of influence which corresponds to the intersection of the spheres. If there is a common area in Epstein's model, that means it must also be managed together, taking the interests, contributions and needs of all stakeholders into account. In this model, it appears that the greater student needs are, especially students with SEN in terms of learning, the greater the need for cooperation between all the parties involved.

2. Problem Statement:

At this point we will try to present the "state of the art" on the issue of school-family cooperation in terms of scientific research in this area, which until a few years ago was rather scarce in Portugal. We going to use the term "cycle" to refers a stage of elementary education. After kindergarten, the 1st cycle refers to the first four years of schooling; the 2nd cycle is year 5 and 6, and the 3rd cycle is years 7 to 9.

The study by Pedro et al. (2000) was the first to be conducted nationally on this topic. It was a study initiated by the Ministry of Education's Department of Prospective Assessment and Planning, from which the idea was highlighted that it is possible to improve schools by changing the quality of teaching and learning through a culture of partnership that preferentially benefits students without forgetting families and teachers. However, this study demonstrates that the relationship between teachers and parents justifies a rapid intervention, in that there is little contact between them, and those that do exist are very traditional: meetings between the director and parents, talks with parents who are summoned by teachers and written information in the children's daily notebooks. The results of this study also indicate that the level of performance of the 300 4th year students who were tested in literacy and mathematics had improved in comparison not only with their respective control groups in each school, but nationally.

In the study by Villas-Boas (2001), emphasizes the importance of partnerships between parents and teachers to reduce cultural differences, thereby decreasing the discontinuity between the two institutions, to improve school performance and to create family environments which are more conducive to learning.

In the study by Nunes (2004), it is affirmed that parental involvement does not only bring benefits to the students' academic success; it increases their motivation to study, facilitates and reinforces teachers' prestige and professional work and tends to support and improve the social image of the school.

The results of the study by Zenhas (2006) also reveal that collaboration between the school and the family appears, not as an end, but as a means to promote students' educational and academic success. If parent and guardian participation in decision-making bodies has little significant effect on improving students' academic success, there are other forms of cooperation, such as "communication and study support at home, which have a significant impact on improving learning" (Marques, 2001, p. 20). The fundamental role of families in supporting the processes of schooling their children is also expressed by Miguéns (2008), who notes that "family-school cooperation has long been marked as the backbone for success in school" (p.10).

Along the same lines, Bloom (1982, cited by Villas-Boas, 2008) presents five factors of family environment considered crucial for learning:

- The family's work habits support and monitoring homework stimulate the discussion and exploration of ideas and events, encouraging oral and written expression and academic aspirations and expectations. According to Marques (2001, p. 28), when parents work with the school, teachers benefit because this cooperation has a positive impact on student learning. The school also benefits because its social image is strengthened. Parents also have advantages because they improve their skills as educators and learn to know their children better.

As for the school-family relationship, Nunes (2004) also presents benefits for parents such as the following: (a) increasing their influence, (b) greater appreciation for their role, (c) strengthening of social networks, (d) growth in terms of information and training materials, and (e) increased feelings of self-esteem, influence and motivation to continue their own education.

According to Pedro et al. (2000, p. 24), “the school can provide help to families in order to provide them with the necessary assistance to fulfill their basic obligations: well-being, affection, health, food, clothing, appropriate social behaviour”.

Given the burden currently plaguing the teaching profession, Marques (2001), states that teachers and parents “should work together, share goals and recognize the existence of a common good for students” (p.12).

Success in any education system depends on the relationships between the stakeholders: teachers, parents, students and political power. It is based on the quality of these relationships that the school can contribute to the betterment of society through shaping of critical, responsible citizens. Given that the school and teachers should openly affirm “a commitment to a societal project and to strong values, to be the guarantors of a democratic and egalitarian society up to the expectations of the 21st century” (Perrenoud, 2005, p. 133). It is essential that the school, family and community establish closer relations of communication and sharing beliefs and values, as related by Nóvoa (1998, 1999, quoted by Jacinto, 2006, p. 42), an important element in triggering teacher malaise is the lack of support, criticism and the stepping down of society in relation to educational tasks, trying to make the teacher solely responsible for the problems of education, when these are social problems which require social solutions.

Just starting from a partnership in education, the words of Perrenoud (2002, cited by Jacinto, 2006, p. 40) cannot go beyond a utopia when he says that “our societies expect schools to shape citizens capable of living in peace, assuming differences, building a negotiated order, able to situate themselves individually and collectively before the complexity of the world”.

The study by Wang et al. (1993, cited by Villas-Boas, 2001), stresses the importance of the family environment for learning and points towards the need for the school to develop strategies to increase the individual involvement of all parents in their children’s day-to-day school lives. Nunes (2004) also rejects a deterministic and passive vision of education and schooling, believing that parents and teachers can mold themselves into a social movement, contributing to the development of education policies which advance social equality. However, for this to be possible, “it is necessary to involve low-income parents or those with a low socioeconomic status” (Nunes, 2004, p. 52). As Marques (2001, p. 22) stresses “when the school approaches families, there is positive pressure towards school education programs meeting the needs of the school’s various publics”.

We agree with Dias (1999) stating that the close cooperation between parents and teachers should translate into communication, information exchange, cooperation, unfolding and implementation of strategies and criteria for complementary action.

According to several authors (Davies, Marques, & Silva, 1997; Marques, 1999 and 2001, Pedro et al., 2000; Villas-Boas, 2001; Silva, 2003; Zenhas, 2006; Miguéns, 2008) all of the research literature of recent decades seems to come to a common conclusion, that a greater involvement of families in their children’s school education corresponds to better school performance, both in terms of attitudes and achievement.

3. Research Questions

Our study intends to place itself in a logical reflection on this issue based on the opinion of an educational community about the prospects of school-family cooperation within the context of being inclusive towards children with SEN, identifying obstacles to this cooperation, and how to overcome them. The question that served as the foundation for this study – What is the cooperation between the school and the family taking into account the inclusion of children with SEN?

4. Purpose of the Study:

According to this topic, the main objectives that steered this investigation are as follows: To identify the perception of parents and guardians of students in kindergarten as well as the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycles about the

prospect of family-school cooperation; To ascertain the perception of early childhood kindergarten teachers and teachers of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycles about the prospect of family-school cooperation; To identify 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle students' perception about the prospect of family-school cooperation; To reflect on the importance of school-family cooperation on student learning.

5. Research Methods

This is a explore case study because it attempts to describe the view of the subjects under study cross-sectionally. It is also exploratory in nature because there is no data in the school group mentioned regarding the prospect of home-school cooperation.

In this study we used a convenience sample. Thus, we selected individuals following certain criteria, trying to ensure they were as representative as possible (Hill & Hill, 2009). The respective selection criteria were as follows: Individuals working in the school group which we were exercising our profession (parents/guardians; kindergarten teachers/teachers and students); Students in the last year of their respective cycles (4th, 6th and 9th years); Kindergarten teachers/Teachers with the position of group/class director; Parents/guardians of students involved in the study.

Our research sample consists of 119 parents/guardians, 168 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle students and 22 kindergarten teachers and 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle /teachers. This type of sample (convenience sampling), included in “non-casual sampling methods” (Hill & Hill, 2009, p.49) uses a group of individuals that is available and, according to the authors, “has the advantage because it is fast, inexpensive and easy” *ibid.*).

Three questionnaires by Zenhas (2006) were applied in this research – to parents/guardians of kindergarteners, parents/guardians of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle students as well as the students themselves. These questionnaires are already used in the Portuguese education system and were adapted to the reality that we wanted to study. Teachers were given a questionnaire by Dias (1999), now also used in the education system.

The questionnaire given to the parents/guardians of the kindergarteners (Zenhas, 2006) presents 17 questions about the prospects of family-school cooperation: Dichotomous questions – P1, P3, P10 .1, P10.2 and P11.1; Questions with 3 possible answers – P11.2, P12.1 - P12.7, P14.1 - P14.14; Questions on a Likert scale with 5 possible responses – P10.3, P11.3, P4.1 - P4.7, P5.1 - P5.7, P9.1-P9.7, P13.1 - P13.4 and P15; Open Questions – P2, P7, P8, P10.4, P10.5, P11.4, P11.5, P12.8, P16 and P17.

The questionnaire given to the parents/guardians of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle students (Zenhas, 2006) presents 17 questions about the prospects family-school cooperation: Dichotomous questions – P1, P3, P10 .1, P10.2 and P11.1; Questions with 3 possible answers – P11.2, P12.1 - P12.7, P14.1 - P14.17; Questions on a Likert scale with 5 possible responses – P10.3, P11.3, P4.1 - P4.13, P5.1 - P5.9, P9.1 - P9.7, P13.1 - P13.4 and P15; Open Questions – P2, P7, P8, P10.4, P10.5, P11.4, P11.5, P12.8, P16 and P17.

The questionnaire given to the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle students (Zenhas, 2006) presents 14 questions about the prospects of family-school cooperation: Dichotomous questions – P1, P5, P8.1, P9.1 and P9.2; Questions with 3 possible answers – P8.2, P10, P11; Questions on a Likert scale with 5 possible responses – P8.3, P9.3 and P12; Open Questions – P2, P8.4, P8.5, P9.4, P9.5, P13 and P14.

The questionnaire given to kindergarten teachers and teachers of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle (Dias, 1999) presents 18 questions: Part I to collect personal and professional data (sex, age, employment status, length of service and academic qualifications); Part II on the prospects of family-school cooperation regarding the inclusion and integration of pupils with SEN (P6-P10), Part III on the prospects of family-school cooperation regarding communication with parents/guardians (P11-P18).

The data were treated descriptively and statistically using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 19.0) programme. For this purpose absolute frequencies (n) and percentages (%) were used.

6. Findings:

Based on the question that served as the foundation for this study – What is the cooperation between the school and the family taking into account the inclusion of children with SEN – we systematized the main results to be drawn from this research:

Considering the views of parents/guardians about their involvement and participation in school life, we found that the practices of parental involvement in monitoring children who attend kindergarten is quite positive. On the other hand, the percentage of parents/guardians of 1st cycle children who are dedicated to supporting learners in doing their homework, shows that parent/guardian involvement at this higher level education and monitoring they give their children is low.

The most significant aspect regarding guardians monitoring their 2nd and 3rd cycle children is the concern about how learning proceeds. The less positive data relate to the conditions of study.

Regarding the reasons why parents/guardians go to meetings and the reasons why they do not, during the year a large number of parents have not confirmed going to meetings in this sample. Those who go throughout the year wish obtain information on the their children's behavior and performance. Regarding the reasons pointed out by those who do not go to those meetings, guardians give personal, family reasons as well as professional reasons, such as their work schedule.

These results are consistent with the literature which indicates that because both members of the household are working and travelling back and forth between home and work as determining factors of parental involvement in school. Parents also mention that school meetings and work schedules are incompatible (Zenhas, 2006). Nunes (2004) also refers to a lack of family involvement in school, because of their characteristics and living conditions.

Regarding the degree of parent/guardian satisfaction on features of meetings, generally speaking, the aspect that the guardians are most satisfied with is the information provided about the group of students. This leads us to think that the practice of involving families remains focused on formal features of the meetings.

Despite legislation encouraging parental involvement, the difficulties have not been overcome and the school group appears to maintain traditional patterns of interaction with families. Regarding the perception of guardians on their satisfaction with the presentation of children's work and performances as well as gatherings with guardians and children, the percentage of respondents who are very satisfied is quite low. It follows that the family-school partnership, which also includes the attendance by the family at shows, exhibitions and other cultural or sporting events in which students participate (type 2 partnership in Epstein's typology) is quite weak in our study in terms of effectiveness regarding the cooperation between school and family. However, the literature indicates get-togethers, activities by children and putting on shows as promising strategies for involving families (Silva, 2008).

In terms of the environment in the relationship between people, fewer than 35% of the respondents (including guardians at all levels of education) were very satisfied. As for ease of understanding when it comes to the language used by teachers, it appears that the guardians of kindergarteners are most are satisfied with understanding the language used by the teacher. This fact may be due to the close relationships between families and kindergarten teachers, due to the child's age and the proximity generated by caring as a component of education.

Regarding the opinion of teachers on the integration of children with SEN in regular classes, overall teachers agree with reservations with integrating children with SEN in regular classes. This concern of teachers may be related to aspects concerning lack of professional training to meet these children's needs. Such concerns are echoed in the words of Correia (1994, cited by Carvalho & Peixoto, 2000) when stating that training is crucial "...given the philosophy of integration which seems to be an irreversible process and requires a different preparation of both the regular education teachers, who must assume greater responsibility for the education of children with SEN, and the special education teacher who should play a supporting and consultancy role" (p.99). This position is confirmed by the vast literature in this area (Rief & Heimburge, 2000; Carvalho & Peixoto, 2000; Carvalho, 2007; Correia, 2008b; Miguéns, 2008).

On whether the attitudes of the parents of children with SEN differ from other parents, 50% of teachers feel that they do differ, indicating that these parents are more worried about school life and monitoring the children at home; they have more contact with the school and are more protective and anxious. These results are consistent with the literature that states that shortly after the birth of a child with SEN, parents feel needs: the need for their child's problem to be diagnosed, the need to obtain understandable, accurate and up-to-date information about their SEN,

the need to receive emotional support, and the need to meet other parents of children with similar SEN (Pinheiro, 2010).

The most widely used communication strategies by teachers in relation to the family are contacts by telephone, meetings with parents, and informal moments at school. There are also written notes and individual meetings. The fact that 90.9% of teachers use parent meetings as a communication strategy may mean that family involvement in school life is distinctly formal and bureaucratic in nature. The high percentage of teachers who use the telephone and informal moments at school to contact parents may predict that the school-family relationship does not go beyond routine and ad hoc contacts with the meaning Cabral (cited by Nunes, 2004, p. 20) attributes: “despite many attempts and efforts, the school-family relationship is still in its infancy and almost sterile” (p.20).

In spite of the autonomy, administration and management of pre-school, primary and secondary establishments provides so as to create and new forms of participation, the intentions that underlie current legislation do not seem to be materializing in the school group where our study was carried out. Implementing a parental culture in school is, in our opinion, the best way to promote the inclusion of the different stakeholders in the process of teaching and learning.

7. Conclusions:

This study allowed us to reflect upon the perceptions of a specific educational community about the involvement and family participation in school life, as well as to identify the main problems and the way forward for effective cooperation between schools and the family, knowing that these two institutions are privileged areas where that education and inclusion occur.

Considering children with SEN, the issues that educators and teachers liked best to approach with parents pertain to suggestions and strategies for parents to use when working with children at home. This position is reflected in Bonfenbrenner’s model of human development where it is made clear that it is not possible to act only upon the child, but professionals need to employ means to engage the family and also the resources of the community. The mutual influence of the person on the contexts and the influence of the contexts on the person seem to be particularly important when dealing with children at risk or with disabilities. It is up to professionals to provide experiences and opportunities that empower and make families co-accountable, with the aim that they themselves will be able use the resources to resolve of their needs and aspirations. According to Carvalho (2007) it is this perspective, that of human ecology, which best serves handicapped children and their families.

To sum up, this study generated a reflection on the relationship between school and family, and uncovered that parents are part of a place that is different from the culture of the school. They maintain a formal relationship with the school and a distance to everything that goes beyond this.

We conclude that it is up to the school to take on an important role in moving towards the family, outlining the objectives of its intervention, the procedures and the strategies to be adopted so that the level of family participation can become part of an educational policy of a school or a school group, where all the stakeholders feel more included: children with SEN, families, students and teachers. Notwithstanding the weaknesses found in the school-family relationship, is likely to become a relationship that enhances and promotes a truly inclusive school, bearing in mind the maxim that “the best education for the best is the best education for all” (Hutchins, quoted by Villas-Boas, 2001, p. 126).

If the scientific community finds it is urgent and essential that the school reconsider its action regarding parental participation and the processes of inclusion for its stakeholder, lest it be the first to be missing and the first to be excluded, particularly in areas of cultural discontinuity, the school must rethink the heterogeneity of people with whom it lives; it must rethink the priorities of the educational process; it must rethink the importance of the place where it is located; it must rethink recognize and appreciate the cultural diversity of the various stakeholders in the process of teaching and learning. Only thus, can it help to increase the number of families who are engaged in educating their children and promoting the inclusion of all stakeholders in the educational process.

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